"The Real as Mythical: Social Portraiture in the Novels of Margaret Laurence and R.K. Narayan" By Anju K.N.

A Synopsis

Novels, socially textured works of art as they are, act not just as mirrors that reflect reality, but even as prisms that refract and reconstitute reality. Since no writer can remain an alien to the world around him, no novel can evolve but out of the social context. Social portraiture consists in holding the mirror up to the society, faithfully reflecting every aspect of social life. The rich, intricate nuances of the social life get mirrored and documented in the fictional treatment, thereby creating a distinctive image of the community of which the writer is a chronicler.

Novelists who assign to themselves the task of social portraiture employ various fictional modes to transform actuality into fictional reality. One commonly adopted technique is the creation of a mythical community, which the novelist presents as a replica, a society in little, with representatives of all social groups. The creation of a fictional setting has the advantage that it enables the author to go about the task of social portraiture without feeling the constraints a real society might impose on him. The mythical community provides the novelist a broad canvas wherein s/he could etch in detail the social and cultural affinities, political trends, religious beliefs and the like. The clearly delineated, imaginary setting enables the readers to see the reproduction of life exactly as it is lived.

This study brings into focus two such instances of social portraiture which employ mythical communities. The two novelists studied here, Margaret Laurence

and R.K. Narayan, both stalwarts in the field of fiction, have recourse to mythical or fictional communities which provide a local habitation to the otherwise universal stories they tell. The mythical communities they present before us—Manawaka and Malgudi—are microcosms of social life. The dissertation, which is a comparative study of the depictions of social life by Laurence and Narayan, first examines the two sets of fictional worlds separately and then compares them for similarities and divergences.

The dissertation hinges on the hypothesis that both Laurence and Narayan have successfully fictionalized their respective mythical territories of Manawaka and Malgudi, making them a replica of the real world, and that, through them, the authors have effectively recreated their respective social terrains. The study demonstrates that the social worlds portrayed in the various novels of Laurence and Narayan mirror the corresponding social environs of the authors. It is also demonstrated that despite vastly divergent social and cultural environments of the authors, they are alike in many of their fictional concepts, in the treatment of social issues and in the style of social portraiture; and that their glaring dissimilarities in craft and techniques stem from their individual differences, thus making their comparison meaningful and valid.

This study is organized in seven chapters. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the two writers and their milieu. The familial, social, cultural and religious influences which played a major role in the moulding of the two writers are analysed there. The prominent themes and concerns in their works are also brought to focus.

The second chapter entitled “Real yet Unreal: Mythical Settings in Literature with Special Reference to Manawaka and Malgudi” examines a few of the different mythical communities famous in literature. The diverse mythical communities cited put the two mythical communities, Manawaka and Malgudi, in the right perspective. The chapter also traces the origin, growth and development of Manawaka and Malgudi as solidly constructed realms, with all their geographic peculiarities.

The next three core chapters III, IV and V are devoted to a discussion of the two authors, the first two of them on Laurence and the next on Narayan. Chapter III “A Canadian Yoknapatawpha: A Closer View of Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka” sheds light on the many aspects of Canadian social life such as the pioneer culture, the authoritarian ideas of the forefathers and the impact of Scottish Presbyterianism on the social, emotional and cultural life of the Manawakans. The Manawakan social codes, too, are analysed here. The rigid Manawakan value system based on hard work, order, respectability and financial success, the insidious affectation and smugness of the Manawakans and the patriarchal hegemony are the other topics dealt with here. The spiritual barrenness, the hollowness of the Manawakans’social pretensions, their proneness to frivolous pomp and display etc. are traced to their origin in the inherent weakness of their culture. The chapter also addresses the search and struggle by Laurence’s women for a voice and an identity.

Chapter IV dissects such aspects of social life as religion, violence and racial and cultural marginalization. The heavily loaded ambivalence discernible in the religious life of Manawakans is brought to focus here. The uncontrolled violence and bloodshed in the society which transform the place to a veritable hell are also

highlighted. Representations of racial, cultural or ethnic victimization are profuse in the Manawaka novels. The chapter also analyses the mixed social strata and the rigid social hierarchy which sideline or exclude the marginalized such as the Indians, the half breeds or even the minorities. It also traces the Canadian predicament of rootlessness—the unending and collective quest for one's roots or origins and examines how Laurence attempts to foster a national identity through the construction of myths which are rooted in the socio-historic reality of the locale.

In Chapter V the study turns to the second part of the comparison—Narayan's portraiture of the social world of Malgudi. The cultural and religious assumptions of the Malgudi world are subjected to critical scrutiny here. At the outset, the chapter examines how Narayan depicts the ideal of womanhood in the society. The constructed ideology which eulogizes and elevates womanhood as self denying and family oriented, thus subtly curtailing their freedom, is dealt with in detail. It also looks at the social life of Malgudi which values morality, ethics, tradition and customs, the institution of marriage and family relationships. Another concern of this chapter is what may be called the new bearings in the Indian society, particularly the tendency shown by certain sections to break with the Indian traditions and to embrace typically Western values. Further the chapter analyses the predominance of religion and faith in the socio-cultural ambience. The pervasive power of myths and epics, superstitions masquerading as faith, the impact of the Indian philosophy on the social and emotional lives of the people all come under this analysis.

Chapter VI compares and contrasts the social worlds projected by Laurence and Narayan. The depiction of the prevailing patriarchal power base in the two

societies, the role ascribed to family and relationships in Manawaka and Malgudi, the prominence given to religion, the presence of myths, social disparities are all critically compared. Yet another feature of this chapter is a comparison of the aesthetic concepts of the two authors with specific reference to their artistic and narrative strategies.

The novels of Laurence and Narayan prove how creative and artistic inquiry can serve as an instrument for social analysis and change. The narrowly demarcated realms of Manawaka and Malgudi rise above their regional reference and assume a universal significance. Both the authors succeed in capturing the spirit of the place and in making it a microcosm of the universal. The concluding chapter further reaffirms the findings in Chapter VI. It shows what the earlier chapters boil down into: the commonalities far outnumber the divergences in the social portraitures of Laurence and Narayan.